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SUBJECT: NORTHERN IRELAND EU ELECTION RESULTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

CLASSIFIED BY: Susan Elliott, Consul General, Belfast.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

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¶1. (SBU) The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) is reeling from a major electoral shock after a significant number of its traditional supporters defected to the Traditional Unionist Party (TUV) and the Conservative/Unionist Party (formerly the Ulster Unionist Party) in the EU elections. The split among Unionists allowed Sinn Fein's candidate Bairbre de Brun to take the largest share of votes (26 percent). The Conservative Unionist Candidate, Jim Nicholson, (who is also an incumbent EU parliament member), came in second. For the first time in more than 30 years, the DUP candidate (Diane Dodds) did not win the largest percentage of the votes, but rather came in third only narrowly beating the Social Democratic and Labor Party (SDLP) candidate (Alban Maginness) in the third round of counting.

¶2. (C) Sinn Fein's leaders said their victory indicates that the majority of Northern Ireland's voters support the peace process, devolution, and the power sharing government. Ms de Brun attributes her success to her focus on positive politics while the DUP and TUV candidates spent much of their campaigns attacking each other. Many Unionist contacts of the Consul General also expressed dismay that the TUV and DUP candidates were engaged in negative campaigning against one another. In fact, several moderate Unionists told the Consul General that they were planning to vote for Ms. de Brun. The scandals surrounding the Members of Parliament's expenses scandals and the drop in popularity of the Labor government may also have influenced the Unionist vote. Given the turmoil at Westminster, the UUP's decision to align themselves with the Conservative Party probably helped Mr. Nicholson's win re-election. The poor voter turnout also contributed to the results because voting in traditionally Unionist areas was low.

¶3. (C) The future of Northern Ireland's power sharing government could be affected by the DUP's reaction to this defeat. The DUP will probably rethink their position and strategies for the future given that the TUV candidate, Jim Allister (who broke away from the DUP when it went into government with Sinn Fein), has attracted some of the DUP's political base. DUP leader Peter Robinson, however, told the media that while some Unionists find it difficult to be in government with Sinn Fein, the majority know that power sharing must continue because "there is not a more acceptable alternative available."

¶4. (C) The implications for how the DUP will move forward on the devolution of policing and justice remain uncertain. Robinson said prior to the election that the DUP would need to see how their candidate fared before making a final decision on moving forward on the devolution of policing and justice. Since the

TUV supports direct rule and no power sharing with Sinn Fein, their electoral victory may influence and potentially slow the DUP's progress toward the completion of the final phase of devolution. DUP Junior Minister and Director of Elections Jeffrey Donaldson denied that the party would go "back into its shell" and reposition itself closer to the views of the TUV. DUP candidate Diane Dodds, however, promised in her acceptance speech to "thwart the republican agenda" and refused to shake the hand of Sinn Fein candidate de Brun.

15. (C) The results of the EU elections could have implications for the next Assembly elections. Under the 2006 St. Andrew's Agreement, the party with the largest majority appoints the First Minister. If the three way split in Unionism continues there is a very good chance that Sinn Fein could win a majority and take the position of First Minister from the DUP.

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